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ABSTRACT

The best learning environment is one in which the curriculum meets student needs, and in which the teachers receive both emotional and administrative support. A program to assist teachers in keeping up with the profession should include provision of a sense of personal renewal, continued confidence in abilities, and new developments in various fields of study. This can be provided on local, regional, and national levels through diverse methods: visiting scholars, research in troublesome areas, master teachers, curriculum research done by teachers, and collegiate education departments serving as teacher centers. Resulting teacher improvement will lead to the meeting of student needs: ability to concentrate and be interested: ability to express oneself orally or in writing: ability to cope with inner and outer change: and the ability to choose and practice values. (SAS)

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Color and Spirit

Curriculum is like the crinoids. Crinoids, those meat-eating underwater plants, display spectacular colors -- but are colorfast only in their natural habitat of salt water. They fade rapidly when held in the air for analysis. Likewise, curriculum -- the goals, contents, and teaching/learning procedures -- out of its natural dynamic setting between teacher and students, seems to fade and become lackluster. When examined with the careful eye, the isolated curriculum seems diminished to a kind of lifeless prose, heaps of well-intentioned words without the force of human interaction. One receives only a fleeting impression of its true coloration. Yet with only fleeting impressions, the curriculum must bear examination for general evaluation and future direction.

As philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests and any classroom teacher verifies, curriculum is the very substance that holds teacher and student together in a relationship. It is what we are "about" together, that tangible force which requires both of us to be active in some sense of struggle. The curriculum etymologically derives from the Latin sense of "running with full implication of the chariot race: motion

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in any event. In that running of the curriculum, two directions are vital: the direction of discipline and the direction of freedom. Those curved directions of discipline and freedom circle upon one another in an interdependence of curriculum. Curriculum provides for both the disciplined, structured sequence of the craftsman and the freedom and invention of the artist. Spirited discipline of work hones the mind and makes it ready for the spirited invention and exploration which excites the mind to return to spirited discipline of work . . . and so on.

Both medieval and modern fields of study -- English, science, mathematics, social studies, physical education, the arts -- embrace this sense of rhythmic discipline and freedom. Every field of study contains the "basics" of craftlike structure and the "basics" of artistic freedom. Both "basics" are interdependent and equally important. Such basics lead to a human product: skiled sensitive human beings who are enhanced in their ability to think, feel, and act. The success of this moving curriculum, embracing both discipline and freedom, depends on both the needs of the students and the gifts of the teacher coming together in some spirit of contagion.

The needs of the students are crucial in any curriculum consideration. There is no debate between subject-centered or student-centered education. By nature of the student "being there," the teacher is forced to consider him -- his nature, his reactions, and his abilities. As a captive audience, students often have no certainty about what they "want" -- only a vague expectation that they might "learn something," preferably without pain or effort. Their needs often seem as quixotic as their moods. However, most classroom teachers who meet with them daily can chart some of their obvious and not-so-obvious needs:

. . . to learn to "attend" or concentrate and find interest

. . . to express themselves in clear oral and written language and in the arts

. . . to read and think critically -- draw conclusions, see comparisons, discern, and choose

. . . to become flexible to "cope" with inner and outer change

. . . to choose and practice values

. . . to accept themselves and extend beyond themselves

. . . to have challenges and handle the tension between success and failure

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. . . to possess an edge of spirit

The listing of needs presupposes students have space enough to be uncrowded and comfortable, material that is up-to-date and relevant to age and level of understanding, supportive facilities that make their school day more enjoyable, an atmosphere of acceptance in which they can hope, and disciplinary bounds beyond which they can't push.

If "catching" students is as important as "instructing" them, that last need of "edge of spirit" is vital. If the teacher follows the Socratic idea of being a numbfish for students, that "charge" cannot be felt without a student being spirited enough to feel the charge and expectant enough to react.

Finally, it is that numbfish teacher charging the student and giving color to the crinoid-like curriculum who completes the triad. With a sense of discipline and freedom, she precariously balances the educational process to entice, catch, instruct, and give vision. She engenders life -- both in the curriculum and in the students. It is her contagion that allows the whole process to flourish. There needs to be a craving and a sense of awe and wonder on the part of the teacher who is the master learner in the classroom. Students need to see that in some unique way, the

subject matter has actually colored the mind and heart of the teacher. She does not merely "walk" students through the curriculum; she "dances" them through. She burns with a quiet enthusiasm as she fills students' cups and calls forth latent abilities: all part of her gifts and vocational calling. Like the Phoenix bird of old, she must rise from the ashes resplendent, not every 500 years, but every day to meet classes. She learns to accept the alternate blessing and cursing of the students as a normal lot, part of the learning process.

However, since the teacher lacks the secret of the fabled Phoenix bird, she must look elsewhere for a sense of renewal and regeneration. She must continue to feel secure in her subject matter, secure at her own core (though flexible at her edges), and secure in her vision. This implies retraining, encouragement, and hope: growth that is vital in any work with adolescents. In a day of teacher burnout, teacher entrenchment, reduced staff turnover, financially unwise sabbaticals, increased responsibilities, and flagging energy, there is a need for retraining and revisioning. Perhaps the primary need for any curriculum concern in the 80's is to provide the teachers of the 80's with a sense of personal renewal, continued confidence in her gifts, and new developments in her field

of study. Who calls forth her latent abilities and tends to her cup? Some possibilities are at hand:

Local level

Professional groups, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, could be funded to conduct more in-service programs on local levels. Since cost may soon make travel prohibitive for teachers, large national gatherings will be less feasible. Such professional groups can easily tap qualified personnel and produce material for such in-services. These local in-services might also carry accreditation for recertification. Now that year-long schooling is with us, some teachers who are unable to find longer time slots for summer collegiate work would welcome work on a local level.

Regional level

Regional in-services might be conducted, again by professional organizations and/or a committee of interested teachers. The month of August might be considered for regional conferences housed on college campuses, usually vacated at this time. One, two, or three week conferences could be planned around polls of teacher needs. Again accreditation is advisable.

National level

Many of today's leaders in my field of English can trace their own sense of direction back to an institute federally subsidized in the 1960's. Such

investment in teachers may be difficult to measure or assess, but the influence has been marvelous. The kind of camaraderie that resulted from groups of teachers learning together has force beyond that of fond memory. Perhaps the time has come for another consideration of such institutes in the arts. Hopefully, planning of such institutes might include the actual teachers who will be in attendance.

Visiting scholars within disciplines

The National Foundation for Humanities has an intriguing program of visiting scholars who help initiate a humanities program within an individual school. Such a program is highly selective and available to schools only if they are venturing on a humanities approach. Such a program would be most advantageous within disciplines rather than crossing disciplines. Professors could be selected according to their expertise and ability to work with public school classroom teachers.

Research in troublesome areas

Teachers often feel the need for additional research in certain areas of study. For example, in the field of English there is a need for additional research into the teaching and learning of the writing process. The present situation of one teacher attempting to teach writing to 150-plus students is surely well-intentioned

but often ineffective. Teachers untrained in the composition process complain about "the blind leading the blind." What situations and techniques best foster the teaching/learning of writing? More research needs to be done in this field of concern.

Master teachers released

Master teachers could be released from the classrooms to travel and meet with other teachers. Such a master teacher carries a sense of validity and authority, someone from the front-line trenches, and as the "visitor in the midst" is often able to gain confidence quickly and give practical help without fear of evaluative backlash for needy teachers. A growing trend is for teachers to seek out at any national convention the program presented by another classroom teacher; it should be "practical" and honest in meeting their own needs.

Curriculum research by teachers

Small groups of qualified teachers might be funded to develop curriculum materials/procedures for appropriate levels. Perhaps it is time to mobilize the teacher as researcher, the practitioner who finally has time to engage in some research related directly to the field. Most of the time the teacher must put out so much raw energy in classroom work that research becomes a luxury. The fact that the classroom teacher has not done research

in the past does not mean she is not able. Some might need instruction in research techniques but will then move along to make significant strides in gleaning results and translating those results into direct practice. Such work could be done during summers or in off-season track vacations.

Collegiate departments of education as teacher centers

With declining numbers of students in collegiate departments of education, those departments might extend services to teachers in the community. National Education Association recently set up temporary "clinics" or centers to accommodate teacher problems such burnout and depression. These departments of education could be permanent sites for formal and informal gatherings of teachers, for professional activities, and possibly even for professional materials.

When affairs become complex or perplexing, people try to reduce that complexity to simplicity, try to find some small sense of order. If such reduction leads to simple profundity, the effort has been worthwhile. However, too many times we find ourselves with only simplistic solutions. My concern as a classroom teacher is that we not settle for si plistic reductions. These simplistic reductions often occur when we are in too great a hurry to find fast remedies. Even the medical

profession finds too many adverse side-effects from fast remedies. Our educational process, organically like the human body, is a complex, often mysterious entity that defies simplistic approaches. Granted teachers, curriculum, and students all need to be held accountable -- but held accountable only without diminishing that essential spirit that vitalizes the whole process. We cannot measure only small, easy-to-measure pieces of teaching and learning in simplistic testing and then call it the "whole" or even "profound."

Perhaps our concentration should be less on that which hinders and more on that which fosters -- and then let that fostering increase. What does it take to foster that dynamic encounter of teacher, student and curriculum? What stirs the beginnings and continuation of a long, spirited love affair with learning -- an affair surely the most "basic" of all basics? In the midst of accountability, hopefully we will all, in our appropriate positions of influence, be accountable for fostering the best . . . so that spirits remain on edge and colors remain fast, even spectacular.